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Opening a Political Account: The Fractured Narrative of an Insecure Author

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An Academic Introduction

This paper attempts to give ‘an account’ of the embodied ‘I’ in my work: in all my relations, all my divisions, all my productions, and all my failures. Yet I feel incomplete without including an account of an academic project, in an academic voice. I’ve worked hard to get to the point where I can say: this paper emerges from the theoretical concerns of my continuing research work on global urbanization, the insecure reinscription of geographic imaginaries and political limits through aporetic boundary practices (Derrida 1993), and the possibilities of the aporetic hiatus (Foucault 2002) to open, at least temporarily, the established field of politics. Where I can say: this paper ties these ongoing political theoretical concerns to the practical concerns of the conditions under which this work proceeds and into which it tries to insert itself, and to the technical and conceptual concerns of finding a mode of writing—not academic, not fiction—through which these associated concerns can be articulated, engaged, performed, and embodied. The injunction to open a political account of my work means something more complex than simply to give ‘a description.’ I feel this injunction particularly acutely, given that political engagements with the urban have been limited in dominant approaches to both political science (Magnusson 2011b) and International Relations (Curtis 2014, pp. 1-2). But, as with politics itself—which is so often used without definition, in hopes that readers will bring to bear a set of assumptions that are close to the ones the author holds, often without knowing it (Magnusson 2011a)—this injunction to provide ‘an account’ that is sufficient, that measures up, that is defensible, is curiously indeterminable. Usually, the injunction to give an account of politics encompasses contradictory gestures, from journalistic observation and empirical quantification to accounting for ourselves as part of the process of accounting (following a Rousseauian model of the political confession, or the more recent

development of reflexive and relational modes of thought). The injunction to begin by giving an account of politics functions, then, through the expectation on the author to define what politics is, how it can be known, who gets to participate, and in what spaces and times, claims which the author must defend in relation to other scholarly work, and through her own authority as author.

Broadly, I am interested in how narratives of global urbanization offer accounts of perceived insecurity in the spacetimes, forms, categories, and experiences of contemporary politics. By most common accounts, these transformations are not simply a change in degree—an increase in what might be called urban politics in the world as opposed to non-urban politics—but a change in kind, a transition to a new age of global cities, or more recently, planetary urbanization. Here, I am interested in a variant of this broader problem. Certainly, I wish to understand how my specific relations of gendered care work, insecure professional position, and obscure geographic and institutional location are embedded within the uncertain conditions of global urbanization and the restructuring of neoliberalization. But I also wish to understand why, despite the sustained questioning of the boundaries of modern urbanization and modern liberal sovereignty that emerge from processes of accounting for contemporary global urbanization, I have left the effects of these same boundary practices unexamined in other registers: on my own work, on my modes of working, and on my capacity to account for my work. The relations that I am required to trace, here, clarify lines of connection and emphasize constitutive co-relations. However, they also indicate moments of disconnect and practices of disconnection. As I argue in a different form in the dissertation I recently defended, a defining characteristic of aporetic boundaries is the inherent insecurity of these practices. This insecurity extends to attempts to delimit myself as a stable and authoritative subject, an individual that can regulate myself and my interactions and that can authorize my own unique and authentic autobiography or intellectual project. Opening narrative space for a political account of my work requires accounting not simply for the ‘phenomena’ that are being labeled politically relevant. It requires accounting for the conditions of conjunction and disjunction through which these accounts are themselves produced by, and produce in turn, ‘myself’ as an imperfect academic subject in an insecurely urban and academic location.

Therefore, this narrative account of the relations that sustain and destabilize my work on the politics of global urbanization emerges, from the outset, as bound together and broken apart. I account for my constitutive relations, but these multiple overlapping relations do not hold steady, and I am driven to trace the patterns of breaks, fractures and diffractions that emerge over time. Similarly, the visual and conceptual distinction between autobiographical elements and academic rationalizations cannot hold. But neither do they collapse into a singular, coherent narrative that reflects, without distortion, my own experience, let alone a narrative that might reflect shared conditions more broadly. Rather, this work attempts to enact and

embody the challenges raised by an aporetic mode of analysis, which requires me simultaneously to follow relations and trace the reflexive and reflecting patterns of their effects, and to engage the limit experience in conditions of disaffiliation and moments of fracture.

An Autobiographical Introduction

I defended my dissertation on January 15, 2016. In order to defend, I needed to travel from Kelowna, where I live with my husband and twin 5 year-old boys, to Victoria, where my doctoral program was located. Kelowna is a mid-sized city in the interior of British Columbia, while Victoria, over 400 kilometers away, is both the provincial capital and surprisingly provincial. I booked my flight for two days before my defense, being all-too-familiar with the way winter air travel in Canada can be disrupted: on a similar trip to defend my dissertation proposal, eight winters prior, my flight had been re-routed to Edmonton for an overnight, and I arrived early the next morning, disheveled and disoriented. Thus the night before my defense, I was already in Victoria. That night, one of my sons had a serious eye injury, the result of a seemingly innocuous toy whiplashing across his face. My husband's decision to take him to the emergency ward for evaluation turned into an hour-long drive south, down the Okanagan Valley, to find an ophthalmologist who could determine whether he would need to go directly to Vancouver for surgery. Instead of preparing to defend my dissertation, I was on the phone, trying to arrange from a distance care for my other son, terrified that the injured son would be left blind in one eye. Finally, at midnight, I learned that, despite all the internal bleeding, with medication and two weeks of bed rest he should regain full eyesight.

The following day, I told my committee, my department staff, my colleagues, my cab driver. I told everyone I saw about the minor trauma I both did and didn't just experience. I expressed my relief at the proportionally good news. I expressed my dismay at having been absent, unable to help, unable to see my child. And, at twelve noon, just twelve hours later, I sat down, smoothed my skirt, smoothed my hair, smoothed my breath, and started to defend the project that had occupied the majority of the last 8 years of my available work time. To the six people in the room, and to the monitor that connected us, through video feed, to my external examiner, I outlined the central argument of my dissertation: that contemporary transition narratives of global urbanization depend on spatiotemporal imaginaries which, when approached through an analysis of aporetic boundaries and their characteristic pattern of insecurity and drive to renewed security, operate as an encounter with the limits of both dominant accounts of politics and dominant modes of accounting for the production of these accounts. I defended this work, as best I could, against the questions of my committee and external examiner. My defense must have measured up to their expectations, because the dissertation was passed without revisions, and my doctoral program was complete.

From the popular (and unpopular) accounts of successful dissertations that I was given as a graduate student, a deeply-embedded expectation had developed: my dissertation would be an original work of scholarship, compressing and reconfiguring existing research, through my insight and knowledge, into something that was distinctly, individually mine; and my dissertation would be the result of discipline, of being willing to spend long hours in isolated reading and writing. The dissertation was raised up as individual labour and individual achievement—standing on the shoulders of giants, perhaps, but a tower I would have to climb myself through focus, dedication, and self-sacrifice. ‘There will always be others willing to work harder, willing to find a text more obscure, ready to stay up later. Insight is not enough, now’, a supervisor once told me. The defense would be my opportunity to demonstrate that I had truly become a scholar, an expert in my field, a participant in the tower of knowledge. Succeed, and I would be free to go, under the shiny new name of Doctor Delacey Tedesco.

But when my defense finally arrived, I did not feel like I was defending a unification of project and scholar. Instead, I encountered a powerful feeling of being split, not only between Kelowna and Victoria, but between two versions of me, neither of whom could find a voice in the small teleconference room, devoid of oxygen and daylight. Instead, I watched as the video feed, connecting the participants in the room to the external examiner on the other side of the country, relayed a performance of myself to the few observers; relayed a performance of myself back to myself, at once doubling my presence and intensifying the experience of dissociation. Rather than experiencing the defense as ‘my day’, supported by the platitude that ‘no one knows as much about your topic as you do’, I experienced this structured conversation as a destabilizing encounter with my own limitations and inconsistencies. I was profoundly aware of the gap between the conversation I had imagined—where I was lucid, learned, and confident—and the answers that I mis-articulated—stilted, sporadic, and always missing the point I could have made. This was not the imposter syndrome that is so often ascribed to graduate students and female academics. This was an encounter with the limits of my capacity, still, to marshal language—particularly outside the semblance of control that the written word confers—to give an account of the work I had produced.

Just as I had a vision of a smooth, polished, articulate version of me performing my defense, I have a vision of an open account of the personal relations and affective conditions that sustain my attempts to say—or maybe just my fantasy of saying—something insightful, something original, about global politics in an urban age. I want, desperately, to offer an account of my research into the politics of global urbanization that has space to acknowledge the inconsistencies that help frame the problems and the experiences that generate embodied questions. In particular, I want to understand how this experience of personal and emplaced relations interweaves three specific, unstable fields: the gendered relations I encounter,

channeled through and limited by both my responsibilities for family care work (Mountz et al 2015, p. 1238) and my position as woman in academia; the precarious professional relations I am now thrown into as a newly graduated doctor in an increasingly neoliberalized institution; and the relations of space and time that I encounter through my geographic location of Kelowna, including my sense of being absent from the network of urban universities that operate as centres of academic production. I want to reflect on how both my research and my relations are inextricably linked to my life in Kelowna and my connections to places and people beyond this place,¹ and I want to understand the amplifications and attenuations that emerge as these relations proliferate and cross and escape.

Yet just as my defense felt cracked by the weight of expectation, this new vision hits, hard, against all the training and habits and strategies that I have developed, over time, to engage and complete this work in the face of these and other barriers. As I move through iterations of this missing account, I am continually confronted by conditions of disaffiliation, moments of fracture, and experiences of exclusion that I have papered over in my efforts to successfully write and defend my doctoral project and establish a path as an early career researcher. Every scholar has strategies for staying focused, I imagine, learned over years and cemented through the dissertation process. For me, the work has proceeded through a strict process of drawing boundaries around what could be let in, and what needed to be held at bay. I wasn't ever explicitly taught to do this, to proceed within the academy, but the injunctions to distinguish between what can be acknowledged and what is out of place have seemed powerful, at least to me.

I want to be able to carry the fullness of such an account into my current work—my writing, my teaching, my never-ending job and postdoc applications. I notice a microcosm of a macrocosmic pattern of conjunctions and disjunctions: I have started to include, in job applications, a one-page statement of research interruptions, a chronological, clinical account of major life events and responsibilities that have placed limits on my capacity to work for periods of time. This document offers no personal insight, no complaints. Instead, it is framed as the most minimal account of life that can be accepted within the traditional vision of the detached and committed scholar. It feels like an attempt to prove that I can keep working, through time, despite the conditions of my life. If this is the space open to me—if this is the only form of space that I can push open to account for the complex processes of emplacement and displacement from which my work emerges—then I have no hope. So this paper evolves as I write: from an account of the conditions of my work on global urbanization as political reconfiguration, to an account of my efforts to open an account of and encounter with the limits and possibilities of different modes of accounting. I am pushed to stretch and break my own strategies of work—both my formal techniques of academic writing and my hardened habits of emotional containment—to envision the process of this writing as opening space for a different mode of work

to emerge. I am pushed to explore the possibilities of narrative writing, in an always already failed distinction to academic writing, to enact a space where I might practice a different form of being academic. This is not autobiography, what I offer here, though I use (maybe shamelessly?) the drama of my life and those who are dearest to me to tell a story. This is not fiction, either, though it is carefully crafted to intensify elements I want to share and let others recede, perhaps not relevant, perhaps too intensely interwoven to share. If both fiction and authentic autobiography are aligned with the impossible, then I am challenged to write as an embodied 'I' that is neither a fictional narrator nor a sovereign autobiographer (Dauphinée 2013, pp. 348, 353). How do I constitute and materialize, through this narrative text, an 'I' that is present not only in its multiple relations but in its multiple fragmentations?

Even if I succeed, for a period of time, or for the place of this paper, to hold open a space for this narrative experiment in being academic differently, I can't promise to hold this space open in perpetuity.

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My dissertation was successfully defended, eventually, and in circumstances completely not as I had imagined. But the sense of completion, held before me as the end goal through a decade of graduate work, remained elusive. I had envisioned a room full of my student colleagues, hearty congratulations, celebratory drinks, the buzzing excitement of being momentarily fêted. I had imagined the feeling of floating that you get after taking off a heavy backpack, carried for long kilometres, when your shoulders feel disengaged from the ground. I had imagined the new-found awareness of the skin on your feet after taking off rigid hiking boots, the burn of blisters earned taking on new brightness against the emerging cool, then fading. I had imagined the reward of a day—child free! work free!—to explore in Vancouver before returning back to family and responsibilities in Kelowna. All this work: done. All the support that made it possible, all the fight and tight grip required to hold on over years to a goal that seemed to recede more often than approach: done. I had imagined being able to let go, for a day, and open myself up to aimless wandering.

Instead, I left the room of six people, had a nice calm drink in the grad student pub with two fellow students and two committee members, and then rushed with a sinking heart to rebook my flight home for first thing the next morning: my husband had made it clear that I was needed home, not so much to care for the injured son but to keep him disconnected from his twin. I had a nice calm dinner in town, with two close friends and two strangers, and an early night in order to make my 5.50 a.m. flight. It was all lovely, but the ties of friendship and inspiration that Victoria represented for me, while living in Kelowna, were now absent, stretched in the common process of relocating for work, for families, for escape from the academy. And then I was

home, administering eye drops and trying to innovate new ways to keep a tornado of a five-year-old boy reclining quietly in his bed for two weeks, arranging last minute child care, and racing to teach a class that I had been offered five days before the start of the January term. Back in the fullness of family and work, I felt empty, depleted, and isolated. It wasn't just that the work goes on, largely unpaid, as before: another paper to write, another class to prep, eye drops and medications to administer. It was an experience of dis-alignment: between the vision I had entertained of being able to celebrate this achievement by a day out in a 'real' city and the need to fly directly home; or perhaps between the assumed achievement of the doctoral milestone and the ever-reduced prospects of attaining a 'real' (tenure-track) job; or perhaps between the horizons that should be opening and the perception of doors already closing, as my geographic mobility is limited and complicated. I felt fractured and unwell. I was Humpty Dumpty after the fall, and we learn as kids that his cracked state is a problem.

In search of a new frame to cohere myself around, I asked for feedback on the defense. Was it as incoherent as it felt? Did I seem scattered? Did my answers make sense? I had no ability to judge. One of my supervisors remarked that I was too defensive, which didn't help clear anything up. Wasn't my role to be defensive? I asked whether this meant that I had spent too long defending certain choices on logistical and familial grounds, rather than intellectual grounds. No. Instead, he indicated that I had come across as simultaneously too quick to cede points to my committee and as unwilling or unable to adjust or reformulate my thinking in relation to their questions and comments. At the time, this explanation left me puzzled. Did he mean, simply, that I struggled in the encounter with the radically different perspectives and understandings of the examining committee? That I struggled and failed to translate their questions into a single language in my own thought processes? Perhaps that was part of it.

I have continued to puzzle over it off and on, as the defense itself has moved further away. Now, in the process of building this narrative, I am beginning to understand that it was a different sort of struggle, and a different experience of failure: I can never be as complete, as capable, as put together, or as present to others, as I can imagine myself to be, because in the process of imagination I only encounter myself. Between holding on too tight, and letting go too fast, there needs to be flexibility to being just open. Yet I have relied so long on practices of self-control and self-direction that I couldn't shift into another mode when required. I have, through minute, daily, intimate practices, embodied my vision of an effective scholar, and on this occasion I was confronted with the limits of these practices and this form of scholar I became.

This is not a new problem; it has been the problem that defines my scholarly life. Recently, my husband and I were enjoying a glass of wine on our patio with a close friend, watching the last full moon of

summer traverse the sky. In the intervening months, my defense had largely faded from daily concern. Our aimless conversation turned to people whose handwriting is so distinctive that it can be considered its own font. 'I have the perfect example', I said, 'in the writing of one my supervisors. It's such a beautiful, elegant script that you have to see it'. And so I actually went into my office to find any of the old papers that had received comments from him. The first one I found was from years earlier, at the front of the line of files. I grabbed it, brutalized the moon by turning on the outside light, and brandished it for my husband and my friend to admire, which they did, while laughing at my enthusiasm and obvious admiration. For them, it was indeed an example of a fine font. For me, it bore the weight of the relationship we've built since that undergraduate class: I could see, in the writing, his body as he writes, even though I never saw him write these comments. I could hear, through the spacing, pacing, and emphasis of the strings of letters, the cadence of his speech, progressing slowing, carefully, with the intent to bring me with him. And I could feel the excitement and fear I had when I first read these comments, that someone had seen me so clearly and laid down the challenge I still face. He saw, as he put it, the fight I was having with myself, the battle between the desire to say something and the unwillingness to open up enough to say it in a way that could allow others in to engage it. Fifteen years later, his comments on my final dissertation draft—now via email, and losing the sense of person that was so vivid in his script—were remarkably similar: you need to slow down, open up, let go. Show your analysis and let others engage and come to their own understanding. You cannot control how others read the material you present. You cannot control how others read you.

Statement of Research: Instability and Practices of Control

With every conference proposal and job application, I am reminded of the intensity and complexity of this interweaving of (gendered) urban and academic subject, the precarity of reconfiguration and the drive to redetermine roles and categories, and resulting impossibility of the injunction to give an account of myself: an account that is supposed to give form to me as a scholar (and to much lesser extent, a person) but also to locate me within networks of existing relations and emplaced activities. I know that global processes of urbanization and neoliberalization have destabilized modern definitions and assumed locations of the city, the urban, and the rural, the assumed mission of the university, and the assumed subject of intellectual work. I know that an account of how these processes are inter-related can begin anywhere. But if I choose to begin by highlighting the perceived homology between the university and the city as sites of restructuring and reconfiguration, it is not from an intellectual sense of the priority of this thread of argument, but from my emplaced experiences of trying to operate according to academic norms while living and working outside subtly normalized academic urban spaces.

After years of living in Kelowna, largely detached from institutional structures of academia and urban networks of academic relations, my position in these structures is unstable, and I am left feeling unplaced, or unplaceable. I feel it continually, in the micro-hesitations and piecemeal refusals that emerge. Sometimes it is the inability to express the value of Kelowna as a field site and material metaphor, and I feel the pressure to relocate my work into a more legible geographic context, whether a recognizable (central, Western) metropolis or a recognizable (remote, non-Western) 'field' site. Sometimes it is the inability to express the disciplinary relevance of this seemingly parochial project on Kelowna, and as I am turned down from another major research convention, I wonder if I should translate my work more explicitly into the language of International Relations, a field where 'the urban' still appears largely illegible. So I float between fields and research networks, conferencing one year at geography conventions, another year with urban studies, another year with International Studies, unable to sustain ties with all (because who on earth could afford that much travel?). Hard-won relations are precious, and they stretch and weaken in intervening years, until I feel like I am trying to claw my way back in. Uncomfortable. Unseemly.

But these relations must be regained, if one is to have a place within the networks of research. And with each submission, with each job application, I have to try, again, to insert myself into a space that always seems to have closed against me while my back was turned. I tell a new narrative of myself, my work, my trajectory, my connections. To do it well, particularly by the interview stage, this narrative, though imaginary, needs to be fully embodied. I must place myself, in an imaginative act, in this new context. I must shape myself to fit the institution, the location, the faculty, the administration. With each rejection, each refusal, each failure to secure a more permanent position—institutionally permanent, but also relationally and subjectively—I am reminded of my place in Kelowna, at home with my husband and kids, teaching the odd class, and trying desperately to hold onto some sense of myself as a scholar. I pack my schedule too tight. I take on too many commitments. The tone in my emails feels too shrill. I am holding on so tight, so desperately tight.

Unseemly. Parochial. Small, telling gestures of how much power this homology of city and university retains to define not just appropriate scholarly places, positions and practices, but appropriate conventions of civility. Such power that with every conference, I feel like the country mouse arriving, uninvited and unprepared, in the big city. I don't have to 'liv[e] in New York City [to be] always aware of how fragile is the civility that makes urban life and academic life possible...the persistent, if fortunately constrained, swing in the life of the city and the university between coherence and fragility' (Bender 1998, p. 4). If processes of neoliberal restructuring have reconfigured the modern city into an uncertain urban condition both subjectively intensified and geographically distantiated (Amin and Thrift 2002), then the swing between coherence and fragility appears finally to become unconstrained. It becomes the norm.

I am fighting to maintain the space to keep working, not just against neoliberal precarity and the pressures of time and money, but against uncertainty, anonymity, and dislocation. The webs of relations proliferate, perhaps, but from the view out my office window, they seem to form dense patterns that I can observe but not easily penetrate. Interruptions become a necessary strategy, not a failing for which I need to subtly, dispassionately, apologize.

Statement of Research: Interruptions and Completions

Of the eight years of my doctoral program, seven were lived in Kelowna. We moved from Victoria, my man and I, because he was falling apart there. He couldn't tell, anymore, which parts of his life were wrong and which were right. My decision to start my doctoral program was a major factor, a source of well-founded fear that a scholarly life would eat me up and leave no space for him, or the children in his dreams. He wanted to let everything go, in order to understand what, if anything, he wanted to hold on to. So he let go, of the house, of the place, of me, of our life together. I waited. He traveled, blogging under the name Camarooned. He worked a contract in Vancouver. I waited. And when he decided that he really wanted me, but not Victoria, he decided to move back to Kelowna. I could go too, or I could remain in Victoria. Victoria offered me networks of friends and colleagues and supervisors, access to a research library and visiting scholars. Kelowna offered me Camarooned, friends from earlier times, and family nearby. I chose him, and we chose a tumbling down, 1954 bungalow for our first home purchase. We were close to everything that mattered, in this small city, close to the lake, downtown, and the hospital. And, after a period of being stretched to breaking, we were close to each other again.

For the next seven years, the milestones of my doctoral progress, the milestones of our life together, and the milestones of our housing disasters accumulated, forming a calendar of sorts. The first summer, our main water line burst in the front yard, and I learned that homeowners are financially responsible for the lines on their property. We have photos of us in the trench; the garden fence never recovered from the pressure of earth and rock moved by machinery. Through all the noise of digging, replacing flooring, and repositioning closets, I prepared for my comprehensive exam in Canadian politics. Camarooned traveled every week to work a contract in Victoria; it turned out it was easier to buy a house in Kelowna than it was to find a job. I read every book on the list, mapped them all, and felt like I had accomplished the required task of being able to coherently discuss 'the field'. The two trips to Victoria for the written and oral exam, two weeks apart, were a welcome change from renovations and landscaping. The first winter, while snowshoeing in Okanagan Mountain Park under the low, cold grey blanket of valley cloud, Camarooned proposed. We chose love and commitment. We chose the conflict that we were already negotiating, and that we have continued to negotiate in the years since: the explicit

acknowledgement that my dream of a future in academia—a dream of conference travel, of international research networks, of maybe, one day, a permanent position at a respected institution—seemed to exist in conflict with his dream of a little plot of land in a little town, and his growing discomfort with city life.

I was newly engaged, with a wedding to plan, and family to host over Christmas, and a comprehensive exam in Political Theory to prepare for in February. Of all the texts on my list, I think I read two that winter. Some I had read before, but ‘before’ could mean as much as ten years prior. I just couldn’t do it. I couldn’t focus, I couldn’t read, and I certainly couldn’t answer any questions, written or oral. I had no capacity to articulate a coherent perspective on ‘the field’. I felt like the texts were stars, and I was floating in space between them. I was supposed to be able to identify and name the constellations, and all I could see was the vast swirl of a hazy galaxy. Somehow I passed anyhow. Whether it is the case or not, I am convinced that I passed because I had known my examiners for so long; a relational pass, rather than an evidentiary pass, it seemed to me.

The summer I got married was the summer we found the buried oil tank in our back yard—never properly decommissioned, it had leaked throughout the yard and under the house. I watched the excavations from my office at the back of house, while I tried to write my dissertation proposal. A new, swimming-pool sized hole in our yard; the foundations of the house propped up on stilts to remove contaminated soil from under the corner; the fear of total bankruptcy if it spread too far under the house, or worse, into a neighbouring yard; the weeks of waiting to hear if soil testing would confirm that the oil was gone and the hole could finally be filled in. It took a year and a half to be able to see excavation equipment around town without panic spiking through my bloodstream. I defended my dissertation proposal that winter, working in a house with no central heating, as the money we had planned to replace the asbestos-covered ducts that had been removed had instead been sunk into the removal of the oil tank. We installed a high-efficiency wood stove into the old fireplace and hoped for the best.

I can’t remember if it was that winter that our hot water tank burst as well, or the winter after. It doesn’t matter, after a point. I was worried. Not just house and money and the constant disruption of renovations, more often unplanned crises than planned constructions. I was worried about what was happening to my ability to work, in this environment. I was worried about what my future possibilities would be—a scholar with all three degrees from the same university (‘what sort of weakness is this?’ I imagined future hiring committees saying); a scholar living and working outside the primary circuits of academic relations, unable to forge connections with the satellite campus of UBC that Kelowna hosts (‘why not register for a graduate course?’ was the advice I received when, after finishing my comprehensive exams, I tried to ask about building closer research networks with

UBCO). I was floundering, writing and rewriting and rewriting continually, but it always felt like the proper form of the question was just out of reach. I would venture out in a possible direction, only to find that I had managed to circle back on myself. I seemed to arrive where I started, only now I didn't even recognize the starting place. I was making no progress, getting no closer to turning the proliferating questions into a structure for a dissertation. Each summer I would send something like an outline, or a draft, to my supervisors, and I didn't need them to tell me that something was missing. 'You haven't named the X yet', one of them would say. 'You are circling around it. You need to name it'. 'I can't get there from here', was all I could think. I was feeling the continual pressure, from my husband, to start a family. Usually, it could not be identified in any specific word or gesture. Sometimes, it became explicit: there was no pressure to have kids on any particular time frame, but he started to say that he wanted two kids before he was forty or he didn't want kids at all. He was 38 at the time.

A solution, or at least a compromise: a research trip abroad, to Keele University. I could dedicate time to focus exclusively on developing my dissertation. I would have a chance to prove that I could work at more than one university. An opportunity to do a major international relocation before kids would make it so much harder. With funding support from SSHRC, I made plans to spend the summer of 2009 in the UK, on my own. But that spring, my mother's oncology team invited the whole family in for a meeting: first with my dad and my mom, and then a chance for my two sisters and me to talk alone with the doctor. We were given a technical explanation for why, this time, there would be no more treatment plans, no more fighting. It boiled down to the inescapable fact that the cancer, which had been found in her breast eleven years before, and which had plagued her abdominal cavity for the past few years, had now metastasized back up her spinal cord and into her brain. I asked about my planned trip—I was supposed to leave in a couple months—and was told that I would not want to be gone. Despite the diagnosis, my mom was not done fighting. She was, instead, researching possible alternative explanations for what the scans showed, and making arrangements for more scans, more analyses, more treatments. Until the day that the ambulance collected her in Vernon for a scan at the comprehensive cancer care clinic at the hospital in Kelowna, where doctors reviewed her charts and files and decided that there was no point doing whatever she had traveled to have done, and her hope of an alternative path forward was closed at the door. How do you keep holding on, when everyone says to let go? How do you stop fighting, when you have been fighting for eleven years? These were impossible questions; so hard to comprehend that she retreated in shock. She was admitted back into the Vernon hospital, and we were all called to join what we were told was likely her last night alive. I grew up listening to Kris Kristofferson, but that night, Sunday Morning, Coming Down became unbearable. That night was unbearable. And in the morning, my mom sat up, asked if one of us would get her a cappuccino—not a terrible one from the hospital café, she specified,

but a traditional one from her favourite place in town—and we knew she was not done fighting, and she was not done dying. We would have to learn, all of us, what it meant to let go. So I postponed my research trip to Keele and spent the next two months, with my dad and my sisters, attending her in hospice care, until the day when she did, finally, let go.

She died in July and by the end of August I was on the plane to begin my research trip. While overseas, I started to feel like maybe this word ‘aporia’ that I had heard might capture my experience of having a problem that was impossible to pin down, so I bought a copy of Derrida’s *Aporias* (Derrida 1993). Once I opened it, I couldn’t read it as a scholar. Rather I read it in the depths of a grief I couldn’t fully feel if I was going to keep working. I read it as a way of working through the impossibility of being with her, in those long days where she would insist on reviewing her medications, insist on us researching possible problems, convinced that something she was being given was wrong and making her more sick that she needed to be; in those long days when she had lost her capacity to talk and would scribble in notebooks, until she lost her capacity to form letters; in those impossibly long days as the tumour grew through her brain so painfully slowly. I read it as an externalization of grief. This text, which became the theoretical heart of my dissertation, was the form my broken heart took that fall. I suspect this is why I am not loyal to Derrida, as a scholar, despite the centrality of this text to my work: my work does not care about Derrida, but about understanding the impassable gap that binds: the gap that divides complex lived environments into sparse binaries of rural and urban; the boundaries that reduce the complexity of political life into reductionist terms such as identity, community, security, and their inevitable, insecure limits; the boundary that creates the impassable void that binds me to my dead mother, and the voids that bound me to her when she was still alive.

I returned home before Christmas and began commuting every week from Kelowna to Victoria to teach my first sessional contract. Fly out Monday night, teach Tuesday, Wednesday, and Friday, and fly home Friday afternoon. Stay with my mom’s father in Victoria, who was mourning the loss of his daughter—so young....why so young?—and the growing loss of his wife to Alzheimer’s. Spend so much on airfare that the contract was, effectively, an internship. The tables were now turned, as Camarooned worked in Kelowna while I commuted. Kelowna is lovely, beautiful landscape, beautiful weather, but it is not an easy place to build or sustain a professional career. In one of my final weekends home, I started to think that maybe this was as good a time as any to think about kids, and a couple weeks later I discovered that this was, indeed, a good time to think about kids. I want two kids before I turn forty, or I don’t want kids at all, he had said at 38. The following summer, around the time he turned 39, we learned that we were having twins. What had seemed like an impossible demand had become, suddenly, our new life.

This new life was complicated. Pregnant with twins, I was immediately transferred to specialized OBGYN care, where I was warned of any number of risks that might arise. Lots of numbers, but I've never really had a good memory for numbers, so I was left with the generalized impression of insecurity. I needed something to hold onto, so I carried around the most beautiful ultrasound image: an encompassing circle, within which were two very distinct, individual circles, each with a darkened centre. They clearly had two placentas, but it was impossible to tell, from the images, if they were monozygotic or dizygotic: one egg or two; identical or fraternal. They were multiple, contained within me. They were initially positioned side-by-side, but eventually they shifted into a vertical orientation. I learned it was standard to name as Baby A the one who would emerge first, assuming a vaginal birth, and to name as Baby B the one who would emerge second. Thanks to the creative input of Camarooned's niece and nephew, we began calling Baby A Caboose and Baby B Rainbows. I knew, from the start, that Caboose would be a boy. I was convinced that Rainbows was a girl: she had a faster heart beat, and she was estimated, via complex measurements during regular ultrasounds, to be smaller and lighter.

I managed to secure a teaching contract for that fall term at the University of British Columbia campus in Kelowna, this time to cover urban social geography. I was thrilled, finally, to have a professional point of connection with the institution, to meet some faculty, to teach without the punishing commute. By Thanksgiving, just six weeks in, I was ordered by my OBGYN to go on strict bed rest. Strict. Minimal vertical minutes, and only allowed to leave the house every two weeks, for our half-hour appointment. I had to beg to be allowed to go to my class, one last time, to explain to my students why I was being withdrawn as their instructor. This was 24 weeks gestation. I set a goal of making it to 32 weeks, the boundary between being evacuated to Vancouver for specialized delivery and neonatal intensive care and being able to give birth in Kelowna.

I made it to 32 weeks, two days.

My babies were born two months premature, and while I have told the story often enough, I have usually played it up or played it down. It is either a source of exasperated humour, or a simple tale of making do and getting on. Usually, I say nothing about how it felt. So I have to think: what did it feel like? What did it feel like to go from having two babies in my belly, sleeping at home with my husband, two cats on the bed and a dog beside, to being absolutely, utterly alone in a clinical room the night after they were born, belly stretched but now vacant, babies not snuggled inside me or beside me but incubating instead in the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU, or nik-u, as we learned to say). What did it feel like, when the sleeping pills entered my system too slowly to save me from the feeling of the obliteration of all the relations that had, until a few hours earlier, literally filled me up? What did it feel like, in those trips back and forth in the snow over the three blocks from our house to the hospital? Still weak from two

months of bed rest and incredibly sore from labour—which included an episiotomy and a hand grabbing my breach baby Rainbows by his feet and yanking him out like James Herriot might have done to a stuck calf—we borrowed one of the hospital's wheel chairs, and Camarooned would push me back and forth, home to NICU, NICU to home.

'But congratulations, good for you, you gave birth the natural way!'

*

I heard this more than once, and at no time did it say anything about my experience. I went in on a Thursday for a normal, biweekly check-up, reluctantly mentioning my swelling feet and sore wrists. I was immediately admitted to hospital and soon diagnosed with HELLP syndrome, a life-threatening condition where platelet levels in the blood drop and impede the ability for the body to stop bleeding. I was immediately the subject of a strict calculus, balancing the benefits to the babies with each hour gained in the womb, against the danger of bleeding to death during delivery. Steroids were injected to speed lung development in the babies, blood samples were taken every six hours, and every time they brought me another terrible hospital meal, I knew that I was not going in for a caesarean before the next round of blood samples. On the second morning they brought me breakfast; I took a big breath, and I started to eat. And my OBGYN came in just in time to say 'Don't eat. I have been reviewing your case with Women's and Children's Hospital in Vancouver. Your platelets should have spiked from the steroids, but they didn't, which means functionally, they're dropping. You're going in for C-section right now'. A different kind of big breath. OK, a C-section. We always knew it was likely, with twins. We had already planned that if it came to this, my mother-in-law would scrub in—as a semi-retired OR nurse at this hospital, and a long-time colleague of our OBGYN, it was an easy favour to ask. I had had two days in the hospital getting used to this idea. I was ready for the operation. Only my doctor did one last exam and found that I was half-way into labour already. My body had decided to get started, and I was already too far along for a C-section.

They changed gears—faster than I could—and injected me with drugs to speed up the labour. I was wheeled into a birthing room that could convert to an operating theatre, nurses trying to strap my legs into the brand new bed that they had been trained on but never used. No stirrups on this bed, more like ski boots attached to the bed by metal poles, which kept falling out, my legs still attached, until Camarooned finally connected the pieces properly. There were 13 medical staff in the room, including my mother-in-law. Fourteen people total, including my husband. But despite the drugs, the labour took some time. Push, focus, push, relax, focus, push, some strangers were telling me. Do more, do less, no, do more than that, no, do less. I watched myself from somewhere above the fray, analyzed myself, wondered why I couldn't connect the words they were using with the incomplete

sensations in my drugged and strapped body, while I listened to anaesthetists and paediatricians and paediatric nurses and OR nurses complain that their lunch plans would have to be canceled, their meters needed to be plugged or they'd get parking tickets, they thought they'd be out of there by now. But in the end, I didn't need a C-section. Two very small baby boys were born vaginally, hand-grab and all, and I was congratulated for having a natural birth.

I've told this story many times, and I've never thought to count myself as being in the room.

*

I made it thirty-two weeks, two days, before my boys emerged, weighing less together than many single full-term babies. The NICU nurses, protective of their little babies, would only allow us to visit two or three times a day, and not stay for long, because they were convinced it was too taxing for the preemies to engage in contact—despite the posters everywhere emphasizing that Kangaroo care was an evidence-based approach to helping preemies thrive. They sent me home with instructions on how to pump to bring my milk in, recommending that I try looking at pictures of my new babies, or holding a blanket they had used, to help the hormones along. So I read the peer-review research on Kangaroo care, on preemie development risks, on preemies and breastfeeding, while plugged into a milking machine in my empty nursery at home at three-hour intervals. But I couldn't bring myself to ask for more at the hospital. It felt like too much to bear, too much to want. You could feel, or you could continue, so I adjusted to the new routine of being a mother with no babies. A small, secret part of me was even relieved, or claimed to be. After two months secluded in my house, I was free to go outside again, to make choices about my activities again, provided they could fit within the strict schedule of hospital visits and pumping sessions. It felt like a precious interim before the responsibilities of parenting became truly ours. After being somewhat ambivalent about having children, given all the concerns about what this would do to my goal of an academic career, it felt like a transition period, a chance to get used to the idea that I was now not me.

Ten days into this new routine, the paediatrician doing rounds mentioned that it seemed like Caboose's head had increased in size. 'No cause for immediate concern, but definitely something to monitor', we were told. 'Go home', we were told. 'Come back tomorrow'. The next day, another increase. 'No cause for immediate concern', we were told, 'but we'll order an ultrasound to be sure. It will take awhile, go home', we were told. 'But pack a bag'.

Pack a bag. That's what bad news sounds like. That's the phrase that determines whether you live in a major city or not; and it's different according to each new crisis.

This crisis: in technical terms, Caboose had developed hydrocephalus. In common terms, 'water on the brain', like a line of ancient Greek poetry about being loved and damned by the gods. I learned, quickly, that his cerebrospinal fluid was blocked from draining between his third and fourth ventricle, and the increasing fluid pressure was pushing his soft skull apart. Without treatment, he would experience brain damage, and eventual death. Within three hours, we were on an emergency air transport to Vancouver, a miniature private Leer jet with gold trim on the windows, doors, and seats. My two miniature babies, in a shared incubation unit for the first time, were strapped against the side of the aircraft. I sat in a proper seat while Camarooned reclined on medical equipment stashed in the corner. The transport medic heard the diagnosis and, by way of reassuring us, said that hydrocephaly was the primary source of paediatric neurosurgery at Women's and Children's. 'Don't worry, this is old hat for the surgeons'.

Don't worry, those words again. Don't worry, don't feel. Breathe, if you can. Listen, hard, to all the new medical terms. Research anything unfamiliar to prepare for surgical consultations. Remember, against all instinct, that it's a good sign if your infant son's scans and surgical procedures are continually bumped—it means you are not the worst case there; it means it is not yet life or death, quite. Two days later, the neurosurgeon implanted a device in his skull that drains the fluid from the third ventricle, through a valve, and down a tube into his belly. A ventricular-peritoneal shunt, I learned to say without stumbling. A VP shunt, I learned to abbreviate. All of this caused, we were informed, by a ventricular haemorrhage, a bleed in his ventricle that left a blood clot. It was likely the result of his premature head being rotated by hand, continually, during the hours of labour: his weak, premature veins unable to take this normal amount of pressure. The 'natural' birth that I had so often been congratulated for was, in all likelihood, the cause of his hydrocephaly, and who is to know whether the gains associated with vaginal births outweigh this very substantial threat that was introduced.

We were home within the week, back to the routine of shuttling back and forth from home to NICU, NICU to home, until six weeks later, when we were finally allowed to take our babies home. As a full-time student, I wasn't eligible for paid maternity leave; instead, Camarooned took the available time, and we nested together for the next eight months, an instant family. In the intervening years, Caboose has had two further surgeries to repair shunt malfunctions, each one requiring emergency trips to Vancouver, and subsequent return trips for follow-up and review. He is prone to headaches, even when not experiencing a malfunction. I have spent long dark nights examining the peer-review literature to understand the long-term risks, without finding much. If he is lucky, malfunctions will be minimal, and he will have long years without problems. If he is somewhat unlucky, he will be plagued by non-malfunction headaches, like those children and teenagers in the unpublished doctoral dissertation who are kept from activities they love, who learn at such an early age not to feel, or

not to admit they feel, so as not to worry their friends and families. If he is very unlucky, he will be visited by continual malfunctions and infections and pain that cannot be diagnosed or treated. Thus far, he has been lucky. We have been so, so lucky.

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Caboose was followed by a specialized Infant Development Program, to ensure that the surgeries had not affected his growth and development. This close follow-up process confirmed our own sense that nothing, not even three brain surgeries before the age of four, could slow this boy down. But as we worked through development milestone charts and questionnaires and checklists, it became clear that Rainbows was lagging. Twins are bound to develop at different rates, I offered. Our lovely caseworker agreed, but recommended going through the same assessments on Rainbows; after all, he was also a preemie, and risks, as I had learned in such a hard fashion, become materially embodied so easily. So we worked through elaborate evaluations, and we watched a pattern emerge. Fine, fine, age appropriate, and then unmistakable plummets in social relations and communication and weird spikes in material attachments and obsessive, repetitive behaviours. He does like to clutch random objects, I said, but don't all babies? He does really, really like to stare at lights and fans. No, he rarely points or makes eye contact or tries to use words. He doesn't really play with the toys, no; he likes to make pieces move, make wheels spins. Oh, and he does seem to have an obsessive need to bang, and turn on the dishwasher. And he can't eat solid food without banging his spoon, banging his bowl, banging his head against his high chair, if that's the only thing left to bang. And he didn't like kisses; we had to teach him to be OK with that, starting with his body, then approaching the side of his face, then finally getting to kiss his lips. Once I started, the list wouldn't stop, a pattern of quirks that eventually led to an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) diagnosis, with a profile of being sensory seeking: of needing additional input of pressure, sound, light, or movement in order to stay functional.

From neurosurgery to neurodiversity, I was pushed to catch up in fields far from my own research, trying to understand, again, the complexity of these boys. My identically-opposite twins, I took to calling them. Caboose was a miniature of Camarooned and his dad, while Rainbows looked exactly like an old photo of my dad. But opposite, also, in the way in which their complexity presented, with Caboose a calm, stable presence punctuated by moments of intense crisis, and Rainbows a low-level, daily concern, like a discordant frequency buzzing that couldn't be brought into key. In many ways, in many contexts, Rainbows has such subtle behaviours that friends and family wondered at the accuracy of the diagnosis. But in other contexts, everything is an impossible struggle, and I struggled to learn the principles of Applied Behavioural Analysis to get us through simple tasks: cutting finger and toe nails without meltdowns; ending the dishwasher obsession; shifting language from his instinctive,

meaningless mimicry (echolalia, I learned to call it) to interactive words that might convey meaning. All this, while learning how not to let this lens distort my role from mother into therapist. All this, while trying to write a dissertation.

My babies were premature, and through all this work, my dissertation project felt long past-term. It emerged, slowly, less by engaging the academic literatures on urbanization and global urbanization than by engaging the cultural and physical landscapes of this uncertain city. Moving slowly around town, pushing my babies in the double-wide stroller, caring for my growing boys became indistinguishable from the process of knitting together observations and observing the patterns where stitches seemed, inevitably, to drop, to produce gaps. Pockets of time were spent with this work, while the intensity of labour was directed to mundane and inescapable tasks: adjusting the schedule of walks with the seasons, to avoid the heat of the Okanagan summer and the unshovelled side-walks in the winter; mapping the public bathrooms that didn't have sensor flushes or air dryers, both of which would cause Rainbows to wince and panic; trying to maintain the garden, for food and for ornament, in the gaps when boys were sleeping, or later, in the gaps when they weren't fighting or falling. Rather than rework the gaps out of existence, the gaps enabled the project, the gaps became the project, and learning to identify the gaps through the patterns they generated became the means to completion. As my boys aged out of the stroller walks, my dissertation finally came together.

During these years, my husband carried the financial burden of this instant family, as my work continued, necessary but unpaid. Another chapter completed—unpaid. Another journal article published—unpaid. Another book chapter contributed—unpaid. Support from extended family was crucial; whether through childcare, or help rebuilding our broken house, or the weekly batch of cookies, bag of groceries, and box of diapers. So many diapers. The support from Camarooned was unwavering, but it was increasingly close to its limits. It was hard to ask for so many years of support—from someone feeling the pressure of working to pay every bill, cover every house emergency—for work that goes unpaid. It was just as hard to give, with no prospect for when it would finally be enough. So the support was given, in love and generosity, but the tally of everything I owed was vocally counted, again and again and again. I am not let to forgot just how much this degree cost. The limit is there, experienced, but unapproachable. The support continues, as I book more (unfunded) conference travel, commit to more (unpaid) work, apply for far-flung jobs, while he not only sustains us all but sees this work as bringing value to our family. These relations of love and pain are written into every word of my dissertation, yet only explicitly in the acknowledgements, not the theoretical argument or examples in Kelowna. Similarly, when it came time to defend it, mentioning these relations felt inappropriate, like making excuses, not citing sources. The dissertation was defended as a work of original scholarship, as a work that was just mine.

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I am, today, exhausted. Rainbows and Caboose have started French Immersion kindergarten. Rainbows has been attending a preschool program with Caboose for a few years, so this isn't totally new to him, or to the rest of us. But it is new. Despite the extensive kindergarten transition process arranged between his Intensive Early Intervention Autism program and the local school district, the transition has ... not been easy. I thought I was prepared, as I knew the transition would cause problems. But it never gets easier, managing him through major changes. Generally, when all things are stable, Rainbows does very well: he is articulate, he is capable, he is loving and engaging and funny and sings so beautifully, all the lyrics memorized despite not knowing the words. Generally, when all things are stable, there doesn't seem to be much difference between parenting Rainbows and parenting Caboose. But when we're in a period of change, when things are no longer stable, Rainbows is destabilized too. And so he insists, this morning, that he can't put socks on by himself, he can't put his coat on, he can't put his backpack on. 'Look mom', he says, throwing his coat up so it lands randomly on his head, 'look, I told you I couldn't do it'. The gorgeous boy in front of me dissolves and becomes a tall thin reed instrument wailing in frustration. We are late again, now, and yet I am convinced that caving in to his desire to drive instead of walk will only cement this pattern. I have, after all, read the Applied Behavioural Analysis literature. I have, after all, tried to manage the challenge of this diagnosis by turning it into another research project. Rainbows is 'disregulated'. Rainbows needs help with his 'executive functioning'. Rainbows, who can in other circumstances manage so well, cannot presently manage this. And neither, today, can I.

And so it happens again: I encounter the reality of his diagnosis as though for the first time. I am thrown from the steady state where life keeps going, kids keep growing, and our daily routines form patterns that I can orient myself towards. At these times, all is thrown up in the air, like his coat, to fall randomly down, and I feel just like him: today I can't do this. Today this is too hard. But no time to feel this way. Today I need to get these boys to school, get dogs for a walk, and get to the university to teach my class on Canadian Urban Geography. I am so thankful, today, that I refused the second class that I was offered—I predicted this disruption and decided it would be too much to teach a new class and parent well through this transition. I check Facebook on my phone in the gaps of trying to coax him through his morning routine, finding my own small techniques to stay regulated, and see that someone has posted research results that find academic parents are more productive than non-parents. I look at these boys, and I think of all the outstanding commitments that I have yet to complete. I am overwhelmed, and I am going to keep working anyhow.

There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in.ⁱⁱ

I have been brought to understand—viscerally, through the work of sustaining a family and a home and a dream of a career—much about the relations of love, profession, and location that make possible the work I produce. But I have also been brought to understand the gaps where these relations do not appear or do not sustain the way we presume.

I have learned more about the complexities of inter/subjectivities and relations from my sons than I have from specialized literature. Rainbows is as refracted as his prescient nick-name suggests, and he reminds me just how limited the vision of the unified subject is, with its assumptions of neurotypical sensory encounters and social relations. It is no accident that the peer-reviewed scientific literature on autism and behavioural intervention uses the language of executive function, of self-regulation and disregulation; the regulative vision of the unified, 'normal' person depends on unstable practices of self-regulation that Kant and Foucault have traced. I now trace this regulative injunction, this injunction that wraps me as tightly as it does Rainbows, through the micro-events of our daily lives: the side-eyes in restaurants at the boy who is too old to still be banging his cutlery on the table; the behaviours he adopts as strategies while he transitions to kindergarten, behaviours that help him self-regulate but that do not match our regulative ideals of appropriate behaviour. I get magic glimpses, through Rainbows, of the variations of material, sensory, and social encounters that open when the grip of self-regulation is temporarily loosened, but I'm also made aware of the gaps that emerge, the painful fractures, the inability to be what we need from each other. I do not process sound the way he does: he seeks solace by repeating the opening 32 bars of a song he likes, over and over and over on the iPad, and it feels like jackhammers to me, these vibrations that just won't stop. I do not feel touch the way he does: he relaxes by pushing against me, using my body to give his the pressure that will let him breathe, and I recoil from one more bit of pressure in a day of endless input that I just can't process anymore. Meanwhile, Caboose is both literally and figuratively bionic—strong, bold, unstoppable—provided his machine is functioning. He reminds me of my mom: his blue eyes seem lit from the inside. But he can be destabilized by a faulty bit of plastic or a stray bit of tissue. Forget the medical, physiological signs of malfunction, such as headaches, lethargy, and vomiting. I see malfunction in his eyes; it makes the light go out. Caboose's normal development is certainly a complex assemblage of technoscientific practice—a vision of relationality that is increasingly popular in urban literature—but it is also a form of absent miracle that depends, every day, on the capacity to open a gap in his blocked third ventricle and keep it from closing.

And so I am reminded again of the homologies that plague not just presumed relations between the city and the university, but between the city and the body. Against this proliferating set of perceived relations, and against claims of a global urban condition or a global urban age, I encounter Kelowna's status as not-quite-fully urban. Whether in the major hospitals and their regional, limited counter-

parts, or in the major urban universities and the smaller regional satellite campus with few employment opportunities, the networks of professional institutions thin and stretch as they extend through space, with very real implications not just for my vision of a possible career, but for what it means to be embodied and emplaced. Life in Kelowna has made me understand that claims about contemporary global urbanization cannot be understood through claims about demographics, density, morphology, or the urban system. It cannot be understood, entirely, through claims about capital restructuring and neoliberalization, though I am well aware of how indebted we are to structures of health provision, education, and intervention derived from a vision of social care that is increasingly under threat. Just as my boys enable me to understand the fractures and gaps that infuse relations with constitutive, unavoidable uncertainties, Kelowna enables me to recognize the gap inherent in urbanization. Urbanization, as its etymology tells us, is the process of becoming like or being made like the urban, where 'the urban' exists, in part, as a future imaginary and regulative ideal that makes any given materialization incomplete, not quite as urban as its future instantiation. My life in Kelowna enables me to understand urbanization as a broader metaphor for the constitutive gaps in our relations, whether familial or political.

I am continually reminded of these fractures, spaces, or misalignments, and of the various assumptions that the goal is to heal, to unify, to line things up. I am increasingly wary of the goal of being true to myself, or close-knit, or well-placed, or perfectly understood. They are goals derived from configurations of boundaries that we have learned to be critical of, in other contexts: boundaries of self and other, centre and periphery, intellectual and familial; boundaries of identity, community, and security; boundaries of space and time, forms, categories, and experiences. They are goals that make me hold on too tight. They are aporetic: in the experience of their impossibility, I am driven to try harder, hold tighter, and reinforce their impossibility. Learning to account for the conditions of relation and fracture in my work is a process of learning to live, without panic, in the unstable opening of the hiatus.

This narrative account therefore works to locate the uncertain possibilities of fractured practice; it works to open a hiatus against the instinct to hold too tight, to rush to closure. Embodying the aporetic insecurity of language itself, it fragments the authoritative, autobiographical subject and resists the pressure to defrag, to put back together in a reasonable, coherent, efficient whole. The aporetic 'I' of this account plays in the tension between the 'ought-to-biography' (the injunction to produce ourselves and our accounts autobiographically, as if from stable subjects) and the 'aught-to-biography' (the fracturing recognition that there is nothing stable in this autobiography; it is as much an aught, a gap, a hiatus, as it is a coherent, full account of our work as political). This fractured narrative of my imperfect academic life—an account that bears little resemblance to the vision that motivated its writing; an account that

required letting go of my vision of the academic in my life—suggests how other possibilities might emerge from failures of work, failures of imagination, and the productive failure, this time, to hold on too tight.

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Notes

ⁱ For the idea of place-beyond-place, see Massey 2006.

ⁱⁱ My thanks to Leonard Cohen for saying it better than I could.

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